



United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0905

BILL NELSON
FLORIDA

January 27, 2005

Admiral Vernon Clark
Chief of Naval Operations
2000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-2000

Dear Admiral Clark:

Over the years I have argued that the nation needs to reduce its strategic risk in the stationing of aircraft carriers on the Atlantic coast. The Navy has consistently resisted engaging meaningfully on analysis, risk assessment or commitment to establishing a second nuclear carrier base for our Atlantic Fleet.

The inherent and evident risk associated with the concentration of all nuclear aircraft carriers in one east coast port and only one conventionally powered carrier (*USS John F. Kennedy*) at a second seems unsupportable by objective strategic analysis. This is particularly evident since the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The asymmetric nature of the threats we face today, and for the foreseeable future, makes the strategic danger of having all our Atlantic nuclear carriers in one port even more acute. More recently, the Defense Department's apparent intention to reduce the nation's aircraft carrier fleet from twelve to eleven ships through the early decommissioning of the *USS John F. Kennedy* clearly exacerbates an already risky situation. This reduction is contemplated despite the Navy's assertions over the years that the nation was at its limit of acceptable risk with a fleet of twelve carriers versus the strategically required fifteen. Again, I have consistently argued that the nation needs to *reduce* risk, yet the naval conditions appear set in fact to raise it.

I am convinced that the nation requires more than one Atlantic coast naval station, as we have in the Pacific, capable of homeporting nuclear aircraft carriers as a matter of strategic urgency and risk mitigation. I urge you to rapidly establish a second nuclear carrier base at Naval Station Mayport and issue the appropriate orders and budgetary guidance necessary to implement such a decision and keep the twelve carrier fleet.

Because the Navy has recommended a carrier fleet reduction that would result in the complete concentration of carriers in a single east coast port, I would be grateful if the Navy Staff would provide to me a detailed briefing on the strategic, operational and tactical risks related to force protection. I am particularly interested to know the Navy's assessments of force protection relative to threats, geography, installation footprint, high value targets, natural and man-made limitations and constraints, and so on. I would expect this briefing to carry the appropriate level of security classification. However, as your staff prepares this briefing please include an unclassified extract that I may keep. Mr. Bill Sutey of my staff is available for additional coordination or to answer your questions (202.224.8715).

I am sure that you already know that my concern over the proposed reduction in the size of the nation's carrier fleet has moved me to introduce legislation that would set in law a twelve-carrier minimum for the Navy. The stationing of our Atlantic carriers is of equal concern and I appreciate your assistance in deepening my understanding of the Navy's assessment of risks in this regard.

As always thank you for your leadership and tireless efforts on behalf of the men and women of our Navy and their families. I welcome any opportunity to help you ensure that we always have the most powerful Navy in the world today and into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Nelson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "B" and a stylized "N".